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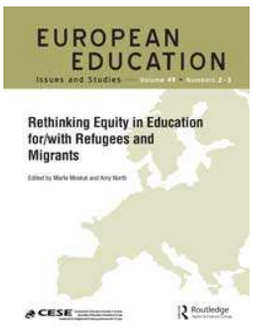

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Online Teacher Training in a Context of Forced Immobility: The Case of Gaza, Palestine

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This article discusses an action research study that involved the design and delivery of an online training course for teachers of Arabic to speakers of other languages in the Gaza Strip (Palestine). Grounded in Freirean pedagogy, the course aimed to respond to the employment needs of university graduates by creating opportunities for online language teaching. The action research study explored the dynamics at play within the online educational environment, to evidence elements that challenged and/or facilitated effective collaboration between trainers and trainees. This article retraces and discusses the processes through which the course moved from didacticism to engaged critical pedagogy.

INTRODUCTION

This article discusses a study that involved the planning and delivering of a training course for teachers of Arabic to speakers of other languages in the Gaza Strip (Palestine), highlighting the processes through which online tools can allow for collaboration, exchange, and mutual growth, despite the limits imposed by the almost impassable borders that physically isolate the population of the Gaza Strip. The aims of this article are to trace and discuss the challenges and opportunities faced by the trainers during the course, and to reflect on the ways in which

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the interaction moved from didacticism to forms of educational exchange in which educators (as well as students) take risks and grow, progressing toward what bell hooks (1994) called "engaged pedagogy."

The training course is part of the large project "Researching Multilingually at the Borders of Language, the Body, Law and the State" (RM Borders), funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) in the United Kingdom. The interdisciplinary RM Borders project addresses the possibilities and challenges of multilingual research at different types of borders and boundaries, and at times when humans are under pain and pressure, psychologically, politically or socially (e.g., in relation to experiences of trauma; seeking asylum; living in contexts of occupation). RM Borders is a constellation of five different case studies that ask, in their context-specific ways, what happens to research methodologies and teaching pedagogies when these have to operate in politically and emotionally charged contexts.

The training course on which this article reflects is one of the project's case studies. The case study is grounded in the field of language education and critical applied linguistics, and is entitled "Teaching Arabic to Speakers of Other Languages (TASOL)." As explained on the project website, the overall objective of the case study is to examine "what happens to the development and translation of research methodologies and language pedagogies when delivered online and in a context of siege." The practical outcome of this case study was to work toward the creation of a center of expertise in teaching Arabic to speakers of other languages online at the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG), thus contributing to increase Palestinian graduates' employability possibilities beyond the closed confines of the Gaza Strip. Within this broader scope, the training course was designed and delivered. Central to the course's ethos was to avoid educational transfer and to ensure that the trainees would be actively involved in their own learning process, thinking critically and creatively about themselves as learners and as teachers. The research aim of the study, concurrently, was to record and analyze the development of the pedagogical interaction between trainers and trainees, with a specific focus on the dynamics of control over the teaching/learning process, and the impact of the different physical spaces and the shared online space on this interaction. Finally, it also explored the feasibility of a Palestinian-grounded, capabilities-based TASOL curriculum.

In order to meet the research aims, the course was developed as a piece of action research (Watts, 1985), shaping practice through a cycle of posing questions, implementing action, and undertaking reflection on action. It involved the development, delivery, and evaluation of an online teacher training course for prospective Palestinian teachers of Arabic to speakers of other languages and was theoretically grounded in the critical pedagogy of hope, as developed by Freire (1994), and engaged critical pedagogy (hooks, 1994).

The training course was first conceptualized in Gaza by the case-study lead, and the general design of the course was further developed through team meetings with the principal investigator and a number of colleagues on the project. These conversations addressed issues like the specificity of the context of the Gaza Strip, exploration of relevant theories, the overall structure of the course, criteria for selecting trainees, the possibility of involving educational consultants, and the ethical issues related to design and the delivery. The main concerns that emerged during these initial conversations related to the need to ensure that the pedagogical interaction took into account the specificity of the context. This included a concern with the physical, linguistic, cultural, and educational characteristics of the Gaza Strip, but also with

the specificities of the online environment in which both the training and subsequent language teaching would take place. During these preliminary meetings the importance of creating a training course that would encourage the use of creativity and art for language teaching—by exploiting both the potential of software and of more traditional forms of artistic production—was also agreed upon.

As a result of these team discussions, five "pillars" were identified as the foundational components of the project: context, technology, pedagogy, language, and creative methods. These "pillars" later informed the development of the course modules, providing the framework within which the trainers were able to develop the course in collaboration with the trainees, with guidance and support from the case-study lead and the project's principal investigator.

The practical goal of the course was to respond to employment issues by creating opportunities for online Arabic language teaching from the Strip, in an attempt to overcome the constraints of "forced immobility" (Stock, 2016) that are discussed in the next section. In doing so, the case study investigated the provision of intercultural language education in a context of occupation and enforced isolation, developing contextualized, critical and creative online language pedagogies. At the same time, the course's pedagogy was also shaped by the Gazan teachers' everyday creative practices for resisting their enforced isolation through the online space (e.g., Facebook and other social media).

This article describes the structure of this innovative training course and clarifies its pedagogical underpinnings. It then discusses the preliminary findings that emerge from the analysis of the trainers' collective reflective journaling, focusing on the challenges and joys of establishing human connections online. To this end, the context of forced immobility of the Gaza Strip and the need to engage with online work in order to circumvent the blockade are illustrated in the next sections of the article. Following this, the core of the article introduces the teacher training course and its grounding in critical pedagogy and action research. After a brief overview of the methodological approach adopted, the discussion section reflects on the challenges of online work that were overcome by both trainees and trainers thanks to shared values of resilience and steadfast determination, which emerged during the reflections on action. These values and dispositions relate to Barnett's concept of life-wide education (2010)—of an education that recognizes the different life contexts in which learning happens—and meant a deliberate shift from a market-driven "competence model" (Barnett, 2010) in order to formulate a more holistic approach for education in conflict areas.

GAZA AND FORCED IMMOBILITY

De Haas (2014), building on Sen's (1999) capability approach, defines mobility as people's freedom to choose where to live. He argues that we can "conceptualise the very capability to move (migrate) as a fundamental human freedom" (p. 25), and being deprived of this freedom means being deprived of an essential component of self-determination and autonomy. The curtailment of the freedom to move, brought on by lack of resources or as the consequence of restrictions derived from forms of social control or situations of conflict, can result in what Carling (2002) terms "involuntary immobility" and Stock (2016) labels "forced immobility,"

to emphasize the coercive factor in the restriction of movement. The continued siege of the Gaza Strip (the Strip) has created a situation in which 2 million people are stuck precisely in such a context of forced immobility, severely limited in their opportunity for free movement across the borders of the Strip. This inability to move freely has direct consequences on the socioeconomic, physical, and mental well-being of people living in the Gaza Strip (UNESCO, 2010), particularly on young people and university graduates.

Sieges constitute indirect and spatial forms of violence; they target infrastructure and aim to disrupt the conditions of natural reproduction of biological and social life. When sieges are protracted, as is the case for the Gaza Strip, their harmful effects can also be cumulative (Winter, 2015). The Strip has been under siege by Israel since 2007, a time when the Israeli government put in place a tight blockade on 2 million civilians that was officially justified as an act of self-defense. This has meant the sealing of all points of crossing between Israel and Gaza, a naval blockade—which includes severe limitations to fishing rights—and limited access to fuel and electricity (Erakat, 2012). In the second half of 2013, movement through the Rafah crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt was drastically restricted as well (ESCWA, 2015), meaning a virtual impossibility for people to move into and out of the Strip, with a few exceptions. As a consequence of the siege, the Strip has seen a massive increase in unemployment and poverty rates. As Winter (2015) notes, "Nearly 60% of the population suffers from food insecurity, and in 2013 three-quarters of households received humanitarian aid. By 2009 Gaza's GDP had fallen by a third compared to 2005 levels" (p. 2). Consequently, almost 80% of Palestinians in Gaza depend on humanitarian assistance for survival, with no means to access education, health, clothing, and shelter. Moreover, if the family has a working breadwinner, his or her average monthly wage in Gaza is $174 (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees [UNWRA], 2015).

Thus, the impact of the prolonged siege has been devastating, and virtually no sector of society has remained untouched, including health care provision, with unavoidable consequences for the physical and mental well-being of the population (Smith, 2015). The siege, moreover, has created growing dependence on humanitarian apparatuses, which have power to impose structures and policies in accordance with "the internal priorities and procedures of international organizations and non-governmental organizations, in conformity with the ostensibly innocent, disinterested, and apolitical principles of humanitarianism and moral universalism. In the interest of efficiency, local actors and institutions are systematically bypassed" (Winter, 2015, p. 7). Thus, the day-to-day life of the population of the Gaza Strip is subject to a range of external constrictions, limitations, and impositions that directly impact on the ability of people to lead "the lives they have reason to value and to enhance the real choice they have" (Sen, 1999, p. 293).

Martha Nussbaum stresses the role of education as a way to achieve an inclusive cosmopolitan citizenship, by fostering the possibilities of the "compassionate imagination," which have the "potential to transcend divisions created by distance, cultural difference, and mistrust" (2004, para. 1). However, for the young graduates of the Gaza Strip, confined within the boundaries of a small area, direct contact with a diverse range of people, cultures, habits, and knowledges is virtually impossible. In a limited and imperfect way, the development of online tools for communication represents a way to counter isolation, as these tools offer opportunities to connect with individuals and groups worldwide and, as was the aim of the TASOL training course, they can also open up possibilities for online forms of employment.

VIRTUAL MOBILITY AND ONLINE WORK

"Virtual mobility" (Aouragh, 2011a, 2011b) is utilized in the Gaza Strip to an increasing extent as a response to physical immobility. As Aouragh (2011b, p. 52) argues, no technological medium can "transcend economic gaps," but the Internet can help to reduce isolation of people in the Gaza Strip, and to provide them with an opportunity to engage in social and educational exchanges. In her research, Aouragh (2011b) discusses examples of online work developed by Palestinians in Jordan, Lebanon, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip and explores the role of the Internet in constructing a national identity remotely. The Internet plays an important role in connecting Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and those living in the West Bank and in the diaspora; it is a tool for information, education, activism, and campaigning, as well as a way to communicate and establish (virtual) relationships with individuals and groups worldwide. Faced with the forced immobility imposed by the blockade, it is therefore not surprising that a considerable amount of funding and effort is spent by the Palestinian State to ensure that Internet connection is constant. As Tawil-Souri and Aouragh (2014) note, "Reports show a systematic increase in household computer ownership from 26.4% in 2004 to 49.2% in 2009, and an increase in home internet access from 9.2% in 2004 to 28.5% in 2009 and to 57.7% in 2012" (p. 199).

For people living in the Gaza Strip, having Internet access can represent a vital opportunity for connecting with the rest of the world, a way to escape forced immobility through virtual mobility. This is not without its problems, as Internet connection for the Gaza Strip is provided by an Israeli company and thus is outside of Palestinian control (Tawil-Souri & Aouragh, 2014). However, reliable Internet connection means that online opportunities for work become feasible as a way to supplement the lack of employment imposed by the blockade. In the context of Gaza, this represents potential opportunities for educated and skilled women and men unable (or unwilling) to leave the Strip to look for employment elsewhere. Although, of course, not all jobs are translatable into online opportunities, education and training increasingly rely on blended learning and virtual classrooms (Boyd, 2016). In Palestine, online learning portals have successfully been used in higher education institutions since the *Intifada* (the Arabic word for "uprising") in order to tackle curfews, checkpoints, and forced immobility (Aouragh, 2011b). In the Gaza Strip, the Islamic University of Gaza (IUG) has developed several online research projects in partnership with international institutions (e.g., Lifelong learning in Palestine [LLIP] and the English for Academic Study Telecollaboration [EAST]). More recently, IUG has used the Internet to initiate crowd-funding as a support for students with disabilities, and in May 2016 it launched an online donation campaign called "Eyes for Gaza" to allow tens of visually impaired students to have full and free access to higher education in various specializations.

As a consequence of the need to rely on online tools to combat isolation, Internet connection in Gazan higher education institutions is generally fast and reliable. It remains constant even through the frequent power cuts, thanks to generators, usually allowing for good quality of communication from computers, tablets, and mobile phones. As a result, many young people in Gaza are able to connect with peers worldwide through personal computers and mobile applications (e.g., Skype, WhatsApp, Snapchat). Moreover, the Internet offers a range of educational tools and learning opportunities (e.g., Moodle, WizIQ, Massive Open Online Courses) that can facilitate access to and sharing of information, knowledge, and understanding with unprecedented ease. Language teaching and learning is one area where online communication tools

are offering openings previously unavailable, and with these, new employment opportunities through online courses also emerge.

THEORETICAL UNDERPINNINGS

The theoretical and pedagogical orientation of the online TASOL training course was firmly grounded in Palestinians' acts of transgressing boundaries through the use of virtual tools and communication strategies in order to overcome a state of imposed social and political isolation in the Gaza Strip. In other words, Palestinians' everyday strategies for peaceful resistance to the siege provided the base for the course's pedagogical conceptualization, which was positioned in the area of critical and "engaged" pedagogy (Freire, 1973; hooks, 1994). One of critical pedagogy's core tenets is the acknowledgment of learners' complex and contested life experiences for pedagogical planning and practice (Freire, 1973, 1995). This includes an active engagement with the question of how our educational environments and practices sustain oppressive structures that disable learners' capability to flourish, personally and professionally, or, conversely, how these might facilitate a "movement against and beyond such boundaries" (hooks, 1994, p. 12).

A critical education, as Freire (1973, 1995) posits, starts when we think from within the contested relationships and struggles with our environment. Here, education is not seen as the mere consumption of classic canons and things worth knowing, but rather it positions students, with their past life experiences and future hopes, at the center of the educational encounter. In such dialogic educational space, learning means not simply the receiving of knowledge from an expert educator and according to a fixed literacy model. In contrast to such a "banking model" (Freire, 1995) of education, learners instead play an active role in setting the educational agenda as well as educating others (in our case us, their "trainers") by drawing on their existing knowledges, skills and capabilities.

Critical pedagogy's main aim is therefore to democratize the student–teacher relationship. Within this democratic orientation, difference and disagreement are not played down or denied but are ultimately seen as an asset to build upon. The classroom becomes the place where possibilities unfold, for the holistic development of both teachers and students. An active engagement with difference allows the wider realities of social contestation that affect students' lives to become visible and shape and structure pedagogical practices in the "real world." As education based on the tenets of critical and engaged pedagogy connects learning to the students' life experiences. It ultimately aims toward positive individual and social transformations that are embedded in praxis. Praxis, as posited by Freire (1998), refers to the combination of action and critical reflection on practice. On one hand, he argues for a rigorous "epistemological curiosity" in teaching, learning, and researching, while on the other hand he posits that theory without practice and reflection "becomes simply 'blah, blah, blah'" (Freire, 1998, p. 30).

METHODOLOGY

In order to gather information on the evolution of the educational practice systematically and critically during the life span of the training, the development, delivery, and evaluation of

the teacher training course were envisioned as a team endeavor. The team of trainers met regularly at the planning stage, during the course design and delivery, and also for overall reflections and assessment after the course's end. Methodological research rigor was found in action research, a practitioner-led form of investigation that aims to identify needs and work collaboratively toward practice change and professional development (Watts, 1985). As McTaggart (1991) notes, "Action research is the way groups of people can organise the conditions under which they can learn from their own experiences and make this experience accessible to others" (p. 170). In this case, reflective practice facilitated the "learning from experience" through moments of open and transparent "thinking together" by the trainers, which were essential to shape the course, to engage in dialogue with the trainees to gain feedback, and to modify practice in a responsive way.

Reflective practice was important to maintain the critical pedagogy framework constantly at the core of the pedagogical action, and was embedded in the course design from its initial stages, involving both trainers and trainees. As Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) state, the term "reflective practice" refers to "those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciation" (p. 3). Allowing ample space for intellectual—but also highly affective—explorations, both joint and individual, provided a core foundation of the course from the start.

During the course-planning phase, the trainers documented their individual reflections on the process, which constituted a lens through which they perceived the design, development, and delivery of the course. In addition to the initial, intense and extensive reflective moments, the trainers shared ongoing reflection on their practice following each teaching session, and the emerging discussions informed subsequent lesson planning. Three further meetings to reflect on the overall trajectory of the course, and to capture both the individual and collective learning, were held after the course had ended. Finally, a few weeks after the course had ended, the trainers, the trainees, and the case-study lead held a Skype meeting to discuss the collective experience and to plan future steps and further outcomes from the course.

The course also incorporated regular reflective elements for the trainees. These were manifested in a set of reflective questions added to Moodle at the end of each of the five modules. The trainees were invited to keep a journal, and to share aspects of it with the group at the end of the course. In line with available literature, reflective practice was operationalized in pedagogical practice through the use of research(er) journals (Borg, 2001; Burgess, 1981), which provided "a device for working with events and experiences in order to extract meaning from them" (Boud, 2001, p. 9). Furthermore, following Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 68), keeping a journal was seen as a valuable practice, providing "a record of incidents, problems, and insights" that the trainees could go back to or share with others.

The trainees' journals were not confined to written text, for, as stated by Boud (2001), "Expressive writing has a particular role to play in working with feelings. Journals are not just the place for writing prose. Images, sketches, poems, and the use of color and form are among devices that can be used as vehicles to express ways of experiencing" (p. 14). Finally, in the process of designing the course the trainers included a final reflection module at the end of the entire training course, where they offered an open space for the trainees to evaluate and comment on the overall strengths and weaknesses of the process.

In this article we discuss some of the preliminary findings that emerge from the analysis of the data gathered through the reflective journals kept by the trainers. It represents the trainers'

collective understanding of the ways in which their practice changed during the course, and their unpicking of the complex online pedagogical interactions through reflection, discussion, decision, and action (Aldeman, 1993). Emerging from this process, the findings trace the trajectory of the course's theoretical underpinnings as they evolved from intellectual and principled "pedagogical intentions" to embodied praxis within an online environment. However, we first give an overview of the course, to contextualize the subsequent discussion and to inform a clearer understanding of the ways in which it was shaped according to the critical pedagogy approach at the core of the course's structure.

THE COURSE: TRAINERS AND TRAINEES

The training course was informed by one of the trainers' recent doctoral work with Gazan teachers of English to speakers of other languages (ESOL), which had already established relationships with student teachers at IUG on which the training course was able to build, and which also offered an essential insight into the challenges and joys of online teaching (Imperiale, 2017). This doctoral project thus paved the way for the online TASOL teacher training course discussed here, by highlighting potential problems as well as strategies for their redress and ways to maximize contact.

The trainees were eight Palestinian teachers residing in the Gaza Strip, three males and five females, all of whom were recent IUG graduates. While six of the trainees were qualified teachers of English to speakers of other languages, two were qualified teachers of Arabic language and literature. The trainees' English proficiency varied accordingly, and while they could all follow our conversations in English, Arabic translation was also used, to ensure that no important points or instructions were missed.

The four trainers/researchers and the case study lead all had experience of teaching a foreign/second language at various levels and all five were speakers of English as an additional language. One of the trainers and the case-study lead were fluent speakers of Arabic, while a second trainer had a good understanding of Arabic and the two remaining trainers spoke no Arabic at all. As noted earlier, one of the trainers had previous experience of delivering a course online via Skype as part of a doctoral project with ESOL teachers in Gaza. Moreover, three of the trainers had also recently been engaged in the design and delivery of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) at UoG, while the fourth had designed material for online teaching of Arabic to speakers of other languages. Moreover, the case study lead is a senior academic at IUG with experienced in designing, teaching, and managing ESOL courses and with in-depth knowledge of the specific challenges and strengths of the Palestinian context.

THE COURSE DESIGN

As illustrated previously, discussions at the preparatory stages highlighted a shared conviction that a participatory project could only be built on critical pedagogies (Freire, 1998; hooks, 1994) that would allow trainers and trainees to establish teaching/learning relationships based on collaboration, trust, and respect for the context of the Gaza Strip. The four trainers agreed also on the importance of striving at all times to integrate any pedagogical framework with the trainees'

own knowledge, expertise, practical motivations, and emotional investment in the educational exchange. This led to lengthy discussions on the trainers' positionality, the need to avoid externally "induced educational transfer" (Perry & Tor, 2008), and the uncritical adoption of practices that are shaped by and for a Western perspective. This can be illustrated by some of the reflections coming from the trainers' journals, as they stressed:

> One of the ethical dilemmas we faced was to ensure that the teachers did not feel obliged to accept our material—which necessarily reflected our backgrounds, experiences, and pedagogical orientations. (Reflective journal, Author 4)

Avoiding a colonial attitude and the assumption that our "developed country" knowledge and skills would be appropriate for the context of the Gaza Strip, disregarding any expertise, models, and needs the trainees may have, was a core element in the devising of the course structure and content and of the teaching approach. An entry from the reflective journal kept at the preparatory stages reflects this:

> Despite our different background and not having done anything like this together before, we all worked from the same perspective, that of making the teaching–learning process a cycle in which everyone's experiences, knowledge and skills hold equal importance and in which teachers and learners both grow as a result of the exchange. (Reflective journal, Author 1)

Moreover, the reflective moments were an essential part of the course design and of its development, allowing trainers to actively shape it to suit the needs identified, and to adjust interaction style and content on the basis of the ongoing evaluation (Kemmis, McTaggart, & Nixon, 2014).

The desire to create a course that would grow from the expertise, needs, and knowledge of all involved also translated into the creation of a short film (with the help of a Glasgow, UK-based filmmaker) about the "role of the teacher," which introduced the course's ethos to the trainees. In the film, the four trainers staged a debate during which they interrogated their authority to teach this particular course. The argument set up in the film is that none of the trainers shared the trainees' cultural or linguistic backgrounds, although one of the trainers was a trilingual Danish, Arabic and English speaker, while another had studied Arabic to advanced level and had worked with teachers in the Gaza Strip before. The film opened up for discussion on the trainers' role as teaching "authorities" in/for a cultural, linguistic, and academic context about which they had little or no direct experience. At the same time, the film was a way of introducing the trainers, making clear their positioning as educators coming from Western epistemic traditions, as well as a way of stimulating the trainees' expectations in relation to the educational online environment. The film was discussed during the first online encounter with the trainees, and resulted in the trainees' creation of their own multimedia statements about the role of online Arabic teaching in a context of occupation and within the framework of Palestinian language and culture.

The critical pedagogical orientation of the teaching strategies equally translated into an overall, praxis-based course structure, organized in the intertwining "Offering" and "Remaking" phases (Figure 1). Phase one of each week was named "Offerings." Similarly to the way in which the course was introduced, with the film acting as input and the trainees' responses to it, during the "Offerings" phase the trainers proposed ideas, theories, examples of lessons, materials, and so on, which they offered to the trainees for consideration and discussion. Phase

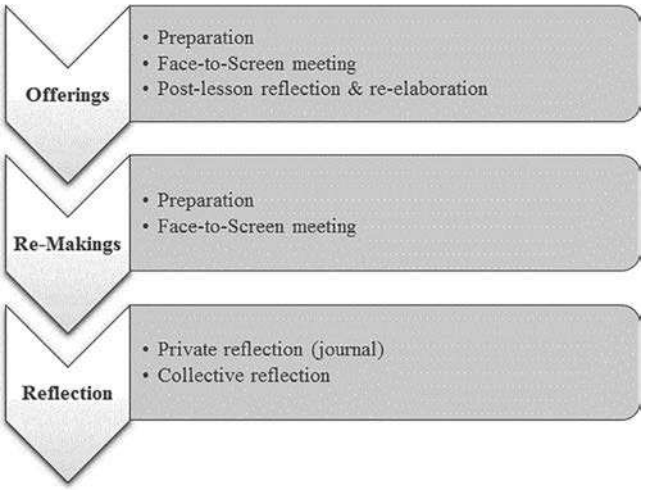

FIGURE 1 Modules' structure.

two of each week was named "Remakings." During this phase the trainees were invited to take any/all of the offerings made by the trainers and to transform or adapt them to suit their context, needs, and pedagogical vision.

The Offering and Remaking phases that structured every weekly lesson were organized around six modules: (a) Context; (b) Technology; (c) Pedagogy; (d) Language; (e) Creative Methods; and (f) Reflection. The first five modules formed the focus of the first 5 weeks' activities and discussion, while the sixth and last module provided space for an overall joint reflection on the training course. As illustrated in Figure 1, each module was articulated in two distinct but connected parts, each consisting of a 2-hour online meeting, which we termed "face-to-screen meetings" (via Skype), and 3 hours of asynchronous activities that included tasks to be carried out in preparation for the online meetings, for the follow-up discussions, the production of material, and so on. Each week also provided space for both a private moment of reflection, through journaling, and also for shared conversations over the activities carried out and the lessons learned. On the basis of the insights that emerged from these moments of reflection, practice for the following week(s) was revised and adapted.

ONLINE LEARNING SPACES

Skype was chosen as the online application for the live meetings. This was a less than ideal tool, but it was the most convenient; Skype is free and is available both from home or university computers, and other applications tested (e.g., Wiziq) did not improve the quality of the connection, which depended on the speed and reliability of the Internet provision rather than on the online communication tool itself. Trainees at the IUG had access to reliable and fast Internet connection and excellent technical support. Despite the frequent power cuts experienced in the Gaza Strip, Internet connection remained constant at IUG, as generators kicked in to ensure no disruption to ongoing activities.

An overview of the course design was made available on the IUG Moodle website, plus the necessary materials and discussions boards. Google Drive and YouTube were also regularly used as repositories for multimedia material produced by both trainers and trainees throughout the course, making these available for all to view and learn from. Each trainee also had a personal folder on Google Drive where he or she could collect all material and videos prepared during the training course (e.g., lesson plans; teaching material; video recording of lessons delivered), to build up a "teaching portfolio." In addition, a private Facebook page was set up by one of the trainees at IUG. The same trainee also acted as the main contact point between trainers and trainees, managing communications, circulating tasks, monitoring attendance, and generally acting to guarantee the smooth running of the course, including technical support. All the Skype meetings were video recorded by a technician at IUG for later use in the research and as a reference for any future courses.

COMMUNICATIONS AND COMPLICATIONS

The face-to-screen meetings were held on Skype, often as group calls. For instance, two of the Palestinian teachers attended the Skype sessions from home rather than from the room assigned for the training at IUG, while on several occasions the trainers were located at two different higher education institutions in the United Kingdom. The resulting group Skype calls meant that the quality of the sound and video was considerably reduced, requiring complex negotiations and very high levels of motivation and resolve to overcome the multiple and often frustrating challenges to the communication.

The pedagogical interactions between trainers and trainees over the 6 weeks were thus established in the multifaceted space created by a range of contextual variables. These included: the geographical settings of Glasgow (UK), Gaza, and Durham (UK); the academic frameworks of Anglophone and Arabic scholarship; the languages used for the interactions: English, Arabic (Fusha/standard Arabic and Palestinian Arabic), as well as the Italian spoken by two of the trainers during accessory conversations and also for some sample lessons; and the online environment and the technical challenges that almost invariably disturbed the exchanges. The combination of all of these factors contributed to making the context for the course an extremely complex and demanding one for both trainers and trainees. Looking at the reflective notes made during the initial stages of preparing the training course, what emerges clearly is the extent to which the trainers strived to come to grips with what was a multilayered and complex setting, as is captured by the following:

> We struggled to keep track of the many different contexts in which the course will take place. The trainers' context in Glasgow; the trainee teacher's context in Gaza, the online context in between; the context in which the language learners will be situated, and the online context between future learners and their language teachers … remembering that the training course will be online but also, importantly, that it will train *to teach* online, is at times a bit of a challenge. (Reflective journal, Author 1)

The online dimension of the course was one of which the trainers involved had little experience, and toward which—as is apparent in the reflective journal kept during the preparatory stages—they also had a few misgivings. Concerns around the extent and quality of the human

and pedagogical interactions that the online setting could allow, as well as misgivings about the purposes for which online education is commonly adopted by higher education institutions, often colored the trainers' reflections:

> I have always valued the power of technology but I have always hated doing online teaching-related jobs … but now I see the potential of practicing innovative student-centered pedagogy. I experienced what it means to give up "control" and power in such a radical way. (Reflective journal, Author 2)

> I always hated online teaching and learning but maybe this is a prejudice that I will be able to overcome through this course. (Reflective journal, Author 3)

However, the peculiarity of the Gaza Strip situation, and the need to rely on these instruments in the absence of opportunities for other forms of engagement, were recognized from the start as a "necessary evil." Trainees would, on occasion, suddenly be plunged into darkness during the Skype call, but the work would carry on, our trainees unperturbed. As discussed previously, reliance on the Internet to avoid isolation and circumvent forced immobility means that institutions in the Gaza Strip do all they can in order to ensure they remain connected at all times. However, this was not the case at the University of Glasgow (UoG), where a somewhat unreliable Internet connection and a dearth of spaces with appropriate facilities meant that trainers had to resort to carrying out several of the online face-to-screen interactions from one of the trainers' homes. Even so, issues of delayed audio, echo, distortion of voice and images, and loss of connection during the calls remained a constant feature of all online interactions.

Despite the contextual, linguistic, and technological complexities outlined, the course was successfully completed within the set time frame, and all the trainees managed to achieve a certification of their achievement during the final face-to-screen meeting. Moreover, while the course has now ended, its upshots are still ongoing. Supervised by the case-study lead, developers at IUG are finalizing a website that will allow prospective language students (individuals and/or groups or institutions) to book and pay for online Arabic courses carried out by certified online teachers of Arabic to speakers of other languages based in the Gaza Strip.

BUILDING AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY

The complex web of challenges to communication described earlier dominated the face-to-screen sessions during the first couple of weeks. Anxiety about making the course work, together with the need to ensure understanding in very challenges circumstances, meant that the participatory, co-constructed intentions for the course, so painstakingly foregrounded at the preparatory stages, ended up taking a back seat. Team teaching, especially at the beginning of the course, caused some unplanned repetitions on the part of the four trainers, who at times were echoing each other in an attempt to be as clear as possible. Together with the need to interpret all major ideas for the Arabic-speaking trainees, reiteration meant that a high proportion of the face-to-screen time was taken up by trainers' inputs. During the initial lessons, standard teacher–learner interactions thus ended up being performed on both side of the screen, with both trainers and trainees slipping into socially scripted roles and acting accordingly (Goffman, 1959). This dynamic was in obvious contradiction to the critical pedagogy principles illustrated earlier, and therefore was a source of concern for the trainees. This emerges clearly

from the reflections the end of each face-to-screen meeting, as can be gathered by the following extract from a reflective journal:

> We spent so much time discussing, planning and devising "critical pedagogy." We prepared a video in which we positioned ourselves as facilitators rather than trainers, willing to learn from the trainees. However, in practice, that was different. Lots of teacher talking time, lots of "suggestions," lots of "we have to be critical," almost as if we were imposing "critical pedagogy." Our intentions were genuinely good, but it took time to let it go, time to get to know the trainees and their abilities, their talents. Time to recognize their expertise. Time to trust each other. (Reflective journal, Author 2)

Notwithstanding these initial difficulties, the online space did become a site of meaningful dialogue after these initial and uneasy trainer-driven online meetings. The evolution of the pedagogical interaction is traced here to emphasize how, even within the limits of a challenging online space (or perhaps even because of these challenges), a sense of community was cultivated and effective collaboration was established.

The intentionality, purpose, and awareness highlighted by the principal investigator, the case-study lead, and the trainers/researchers over the preparatory stages of the course were instrumental but not sufficient in laying the ground for a pedagogical practice that would draw equally on trainers' and trainees' experience, knowledge, and understandings in order to shape the program's outcomes. Other elements had to fall into place before this connection could occur, elements that allowed the intellectual and ethical choice of critical pedagogy and action research to be embedded in practice, and so to establish praxis as informed, committed action (Freire, 1998). Crucial to this was the establishing of a relationship of trust between trainers and trainees, grounded in shared values of cooperation and determination, which arose from (a) letting go of socially constructed roles; (b) bypassing linguistic and technical challenges; and, perhaps most importantly, (c) sharing a desire for the human connection to happen.

Letting go of socially constructed roles meant unsettling the social front that gave rise to "abstract stereotype expectations" (Goffman, 1959, p. 37). This was done unintentionally and on the spur of the moment, when the trainees were given access to the trainers' physical space "behind the scenes." This happened during a face-to-screen conversation with the trainees on issues around "teaching personae" and "professionalism," when one of the trainers turned the laptop used for the call away from the trainers and toward the surrounding space. This revealed that what the trainees had so far understood to be a room in a higher education institution was actually the kitchen of a private home, a corner of which had been carefully purged of the most obvious signs of its everyday use so it could look like a university office.

Letting go of the expected roles also meant disrupting expectations of behaviors consistent with the "characters," such as allowing opportunity for humor during the interactions, but also through encouraging the trainees to take the lead during the face-to-screen meetings. An in-depth discussion of these dynamics is beyond the scope of this article and will be the object of a future publication. However, it is important here to note that these spontaneous, unplanned actions were instrumental in translating into actual practice the trainers' stated willingness to let go of their role as "experts"—which included letting go of formal behaviors and the revealing intimate spaces disguised as institutional—thus opening up opportunities for

more equitable exchanges. The personal and professional growth this afforded not just to the trainees but also to the trainers is captured in the following extract from a final reflection:

> The opportunity to contribute to the Gaza teacher education programme lead me to re-explore the teacher and teacher educator in me. It was interesting to see how I drew on earlier theoretical understandings and classroom practice to develop a totally new course, for a very different context. (Reflective Journal, Author 4)

The human interaction could only be achieved by bypassing the technical and linguistic challenges to the communication. This required, as well as constant awareness of teacher positionality through critical reflection (Howard, 2003), the letting go of concerns about practical difficulties during the verbal exchanges in order to focus entirely on making communication happen. Language interpretation, as noted previously, was used to bridge the different languages used in the course, that is, Palestinian and Standard Arabic (or Fusha) and English, which were used for communication. As well as Arabic, however, other languages were occasionally used by the trainers to speak among each other or for "taster" lessons, adding to the multilingual dimension of the course. The interpreting was usually done by one of the trainers or, less often, by the trainees. It was provided as required to keep the meaning of a conversation clear and became slightly less systematic as it emerged that all trainees understood enough spoken English to follow the main ideas of a conversation, thus saving on time already restricted by the challenges of the online connection.

Several strategies needed to be put in place in order to minimize or bypass the poor and unreliable quality of the online encounters. Among others, these included switching some (sometimes all) the participants' Skype videos off; using the Skype chat facility to communicate during interruptions or at times of particularly poor reception; terminating a group call and starting a new one; waiting to get one or more participants back after they had been cut off; having alternative offline material ready on Google drive for all to access; and communicating via other online means (e.g., Facebook or WhatsApp).

As noted, however, while during the first few face-to-screen meetings linguistic and technical challenges to understanding were at the forefront of the communicative experience and partly hijacked the exchange between trainer and trainees, by the third week they had been accepted as an integral dimension of the shared online space. Toward the end of the course they had been subsumed into the expected pace of interaction and had almost faded into the background, remaining in the trainers' and trainees' awareness principally as something to joke about, and around which a group identity also developed. Communication difficulties thus became, unexpectedly, a way for trainers and trainees to bond, as the need to overcome technical challenges in order to keep the conversation going provided a shared goal for joint efforts.

Wanting the human connection to happen was, arguably, the most important aspect of the program, one that ensured not only that the course ran according to design and within the time frame agreed despite all the practical challenges, but also that it resulted in lasting relationships between several of the trainers and the trainees, extending beyond the end of the training and beyond the educational setting. It is unlikely that a similar training course, with its huge contextual and linguistic complexities and its recurrent, often severe, technical difficulties, could have been as successful without the unswerving commitment of both trainers and trainees. The successful completion of the course rested upon the strength of the team's wish to do

something of practical utility to circumvent at least some of the limitations imposed by the siege. However, it also required the trainees' desire to gain educational capital (Bourdieu, 1986), directly translatable into opportunities for employment, but also, at the same time, their desire to become part of an international learning community, providing and receiving academic hospitality (Phipps & Barnett, 2007) in the face of forced immobility.

Our analysis of the trainers' reflective journals clearly shows how the theoretical underpinnings of the course, which drew from the work on critical pedagogy of Freire and hooks, evolved through constant thinking and in conversation. The course aimed to translate this theoretical framework into a workable training model, allowing a space where contextualized knowledges, skills, and cultural and academic traditions come together through authentic human connections, working within and against the physical boundaries and the limits of the online tools. Grounding the training course within a critical pedagogy framework was essential to ensure that the course would not just be another case of educational transfer perpetrating a division between the bearers of recognized knowledge and the receivers of this knowledge, each confined to their own side of the screen. We believe that the course managed to establish connections and collaborations based on equity and reciprocity. Essential to this was the collective identification of the needs determined by the specific context of siege, using the online tool creatively to engage our humanity.

Since the end of the training, some of the trainees started delivering online language classes, and more opportunities will hopefully be available to them once the TASOL website at IUG is completed. However, we also feel that it is important for us to stress that, while this training course and its ramifications may go a little way to redress the challenges posed by forced immobility to teachers of Arabic in the Gaza Strip, we do not wish to imply in any way that this is an acceptable alternative for the physical freedom to move that has been denied for so long to the Strip's population.

CONCLUSIONS

This article has illustrated and discussed an online training course for teachers of Arabic to speakers of other languages in the context of siege of the Gaza Strip (Palestine) as an example of education in conflict-affected areas. A variety of human-made challenges and crises affect the everyday lives of the population of the Strip in many ways and with dire consequences on individuals' physical and mental well-being. One of the major consequences of the siege imposed on the Gaza Strip is forced immobility, which impacts on people's ability to "live the life they have reason to value" (Sen, 1999) by dramatically curtailing their freedom to move.

Virtual mobility can be a way to partially redress the enforced immobility of the population of the Gaza Strip, offering them a way to find online employment opportunities and to lessen their isolation. The practical goal of the case study discussed in this article was precisely that of providing a group of graduates of the Islamic University of Gaza with the training and tools needed to find work as online teachers of Arabic to speakers of other languages. The impact of this project is still developing, but the IUG Arabic Center has now an online presence where potential learners of Arabic can register for courses[1] and free "taster" language courses started

[1]The Arabic Center website is available at http://arabic.iugaza.edu.ps

in January 2017 to consolidate the trainees' pedagogical skills. As well as these practical goals, however, the course had also aimed to build human connections and to ensure the emerging of educational spaces grounded in values of determination, resilience, cooperation, and commitment to goodness and welfare.

The course was delivered online through a range of Internet tools, with twice-weekly Skype meetings between trainers and trainees. The challenges encountered throughout the delivery of the course were several, mainly technological and linguistic in nature, and both trainers and trainees had to learn to incorporate these challenges into their interactions and to accept them as a "normal" part of the online exchange. A greater concern, during the initial part of the course, was the awareness of a tendency, on both sides of the computer screen, to conform to the "socially scripted roles" (Goffman, 1959) of teacher/learner. Nevertheless, the learning community's resolute commitment to sustain communication, continue the teaching/learning situation, and invest in the building of human relationships —beyond the frozen images, the distorted voices, and the blurred faces—carried the course from didactism into a more equitable exchange in which both trainers and trainees took risks and grew. As discussed in the article, this involved letting go of socially constructed roles; bypassing linguistic and technical challenges; and sharing a desire for the human connection to happen.

This article is not intended to provide a watertight "how to" guide for educators on how to run an online training course for language teachers in conflict areas, nor to offer a solution to the huge problems faced by people trapped in a condition of forced immobility. The contribution of this article and the encouragement offers to educators and researchers ultimately concern a more human level. The article speaks to the feeling of being overwhelmed by the complex nature of a project; the anxiety of not having enough specific expertise or experience to work in a context of pain and pressure; and the stress when online communication is virtually impossible and pedagogical interaction becomes overly didactic. It seeks to encourage educators to work with these complexities, challenges, and interruptions and to regard them as "possibilities in the making." Shared determination to make connection happen in the face of (felt and real) "impossibility" is the real asset for co-constructing a successful project of this nature, and it is the most needed resource at the heart of an "engaged critical pedagogy" (hooks, 1994). Facing our deficits and making them work collectively and in praxis is the only way that pedagogy might become a critical embodied practice that could even give rise to celebration:

> I celebrate teaching that enables transgressions—a movement against and beyond boundaries. It is that movement which makes education the practice of freedom. (hooks, 1994, p. 12)

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